



Association Européenne des
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AEC Session on The Future of Early Music Departments - Early Music Summit 2020

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The early music movement has come a long way since its beginning in the mid-20th century, and has had a monumental impact on the musical world at large. Early music now being taught in many Conservatories around the world, the movement has in turn been influenced by the Conservatory paradigm, as the latter has contributed to forming new generations of HIP musicians. The relationship between the two would benefit from being revisited, in order to build departments that better represent the eclecticism of today's classical music world, incorporate the new developments in musicological research, and ultimately prepare students to face what awaits them after their graduation.

First of all, how should we name HIP departments? Early music is a term linked to repertoire, and therefore doesn't reflect the current definition of a practice where all music can be explored in a historically-minded manner. The term Historically Informed may also not be entirely appropriate: how informed can we truly be? and what kind of information is really being taught in early music departments today? While we are teaching an approach where historical documentation, a wider understanding of earlier practices, and period instruments are important to music making today, we are also passing on an aural tradition that is very much a 20th-century invention.

In my opinion, we should not try to define what we do in opposition with the modern departments, as this dichotomy is perhaps not as present as it once was. I have frequently met musicians who identify equally as modern and HiP players. The line between the two worlds is especially blurred when it comes to Romantic Performance practice. There, the repertoire is essentially the same, and everyone has access to historical recordings and can hear how Saint-Saëns, Rachmaninov, Ysaÿe or even older composers like Brahms play their own works. In that case, what defines HIP might lie only in the approach, the general philosophy of performance, and which tools we use: do we think it is essential to use the expressive tools used by musicians from the time of the music we perform, or can we just play according to our current taste and be generally influenced by a myriad of sources?

In any case, the situation is complex, even when we compare which sources are used by “modern” and “early” musicians. On one hand, one could fit right in today’s early music scene while almost exclusively relying on contemporary examples stemming from recordings made by other HiP players, and not so much on historical sources - there is a new oral tradition for early music, that we interact with whether we want to or not. On the other hand, a modern instrumentalist could love the recordings made by Alfred Cortot, and be naturally compelled to emulate that style while playing late-Romantic French repertoire.

I can imagine two different scenarios for the future. In the first scenario, there would not be a separate modern department, but rather several departments separated by centuries. This would be helpful for students interested in delving in a particular style, since the skills required to play 16th or 19th century music are very different. In this scenario as I imagine it, students would be free to interact with as many departments as they need and want, to explore music from various eras, or to prepare for modern orchestra auditions. The second scenario is one where there would not be a separate early music department, but rather a myriad of performance practice and period instrument classes that all students are invited to take.